

Exile's Aftermath

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Summary: Chell has left Aperture Laboratories, but the world has changed for the worse since last time she was out here. With the Combine's ever-present menace and the desperate struggle of the Resistance going on around her, she'll have to decide what to do in this strange new world, and fast. Written from Chell's perspective, in First Person. (ON HIATUS DUE TO LACK OF INSPIRATION)

1. Into the Unknown

Exile's Aftermath â€"

Chapter One -

Four hours ago, GLaDOS let me out of Aperture Laboratories. Four hours later, I'm still standing outside the corrugated iron shed that hides the elevator, with no idea what to do. The sun began its downward journey at least two hours ago, it won't be long before it starts to set. I want to be somewhere else by then, I have a feeling this field won't seem nearly as inviting at night. I set off, the waist-high wheat stalks crumpling underfoot as I stride quickly but cautiously through the field. So far I can't see anything but more wheat, but I push on, I don't want to be caught out in the open at night, a lot can change in 20 years, and things weren't exactly rosy before I got trapped in Aperture. As I wander through the golden field, my thoughts wander back to GLaDOS's words when I fought her the first time "Are you trying to escape? Things have changed since the last time you left the building. What's going on out there will make you wish you were back in here." Her words hadn't been entirely encouraging in any way about the safety of the outside world. I continue further, the edge of the fields in sight, when a whining noise stops me in my tracks. The noise is mechanical, and getting closer and louder until suddenly a jet black shape bursts out of the cover of the treeline at the edge of the field and soars over my head, its angular form heading somewhere else, and fast. A word comes to mind, from back before I was captured by GLaDOS: Helicopter. Although, thinking about it, the helicopters I had seen were far less

menacing, and often brightly coloured. I get the feeling that helicopter has one purpose and one purpose only: war. The sight of the military aircraft brings back another one of GLaDOS's warnings about the outside world: "All I know is I'm the only thing standing between us and them._" Whoever "they" were, they didn't sound friendly, and if they were the same ones in control of that helicopter, I'll have more than just animals to worry about.

I push on, painfully aware of my vulnerability out here in the open. I move forwards at a sensible speed for a few more steps before I can stand the goosebumps on the back of my neck no longer and break into an all-out sprint to the safety of the woods. The safe feeling from the trees doesn't last long however, and before long the forest seems claustrophobic and dark, even worse than the field. Anything could be lurking in here, hidden by the mass of shadows wrapping its dark tendrils around my mind. Paranoia has begun to set in, and every noise, every breeze every sudden change of light has me looking over my shoulder, the darkness shifting to form shapes from the trees' slender branches. Palms beginning to sweat, I move into a jog through the cramped forest, afraid to go any faster in case I trip, afraid to go slower in case anything really IS out there. Deeper and deeper into the forest I go, I run until I'm too exhausted to, then stagger tiredly through the mass of bark and branches, always going forwards, learnt by now never to look back. Hours pass and I'm even more exhausted and my head hurts from dehydration. I'd give anything for a glass of water right now. The adrenaline wears off and sheer exhaustion drops me to my knees, my throat burning for a drink. I crawl forwards on my knees, no energy left to walk any more. I drag myself forward, forward, forward, until exhaustion takes me and I pass out on the damp forest floor.

"BRAATATATATATATATATATAT" The unmistakeable sound of a machinegun's chatter snaps me awake, and I instinctively dive for cover, mind alert for any threat. Voices in the distance yell "GO, GO, GO", muffled by some sort of static. Footsteps in the distance, drawing closer, two sets, I realise. Another burst of gunfire cuts through the brittle cold air and a woman's scream sounds. Then another round of leaden death cuts her off and a thud sounds, close. There's only one set of the original footsteps now, the sound of crashing boots not far behind it. I crouch fearfully behind a fallen tree, praying that the source of the gunfire doesn't enter my clearing. My prayers go unanswered, and the figure of a man, his clothing streaked with blood, bursts out of the treeline. He looks like he hasn't slept in days, his eyes wide with fear. He looks over his shoulder to check for his pursuers and trips, landing with his face not far from where I'm hiding. Flashlight beams break the darkness and beyond the trees I see several pairs of glowing blue eyes looking back at me, moving closer. The man sees me, and for a moment our eyes meet, a tear streaking down his desperate face. "Helpâ€œ|meâ€œ|" He whispers, crying out in despair as four armoured figures storm into the clearing. They aim their guns at him, and their leader gives the order: "FIRE".

"BRATATATATATATATATAT" The man's outstretched arm drops as the bullets deliver swift, cold, efficient death, just like the men who sent them on their deadly way. I go limp, doing my best to stay out of sight, but it's no use, one of the gas-masked deathbringers sees my body lying next to the fallen tree and he moves over to examine my still form. I close my eyes and try to play dead, my only hope of survival now. The soldier turns my body over roughly with his boot,

but I manage somehow not to react. One of his squad calls "That one dead?" and he replies "Yeah, we're done here". The murderers move off into the distance, their stomping boots growing ever-distant, though the mark of what they did is still as present in my thoughts.

Shaking, I raise myself up from the floor and jump out of my skin at the pair of eyes staring back at me. As I pick myself back up from the floor, I look back into the eyes of the person and see as much fear in those eyes as I must have in mine. The moon's light cuts through the foliage to light the person's face. I see that she's a woman, a little older than I am, with scars down the left side of her face and a wrecked helmet still clinging to her head. Whatever happened to cause this amount of damage, I'm pretty sure she'd be dead if not for that helmet. She puts a finger to her lips, signalling to be quiet as she pulls a sizeable rifle from her back and loads it, looking momentarily over her shoulder before repeating the warning to be quiet. I shrug, miming that I can't speak, taken by surprise when she tells me, in fluent sign language that she too is mute, probably from that blow to her head. She raises the rifle to her eye, and looks around us before lowering it to her lap and signalling "You should sleep; you look like you need it." I begin to sign "No" but realise I really do need to sleep, and if we have to move very far tomorrow I'll be no use to anyone if I can't stay awake. I've only just met her, and already I'm using "we" like we're friends. How do I know she wants me to tag along, how do I know I want to tag along? For all I know, she'll probably cut my throat while I'm asleep. Shaking my head to try to clear my thoughts, I settle into an uneasy sleep.

I wake to find my throat unharmed and my acquaintance from last night cooking fish of some description over a campfire. Her rifle lies along with two pistols on the forest floor, shining as if recently cleaned. She offers me one of the newly cooked fish, and I take it. I let it cool for a moment, examining it suspiciously before taking a bite at her insistence. It tastes good, and I give her a thumbs up, genuinely surprised at her skill at cooking it. She smiles and takes her own, signing "Thanks" at me before sitting opposite me, crossing her legs. I'm suddenly reminded of a meditating priest and burst out laughing, my companion giving me a puzzled look as I laugh silently, wiping tears from the corners of my eyes. I probably shouldn't be finding this as funny as I am, but I guess that's because it's the most amusing thing I've seen in the last few days, though that's not really saying much, considering. After we finish, she picks up her rifle, checking it's working before slinging it casually over her back as if it was the most harmless thing in the world and not a weapon. She picks up her pistols, placing one in a holster before handing me the other. With the cold steel in my hand returns the dark feeling of last night, the joy of the morning shattered by cold reality. We stand and she leads the way through the forest, as I follow I notice her boots have heel springs almost identical to the ones on my own Long Fall Boots, only white to match her immaculate white uniform. How she keeps it clean, I don't know, my clothes are filthy from yesterday's episode, my top spattered with the man's blood, a reminder of yesterday's events I can't simply will away. The forest floor below my feet becomes clearer of debris, and I find myself on a narrow dirt path, winding round the hillside the forest covers. The trees seem to be getting further apart, the claustrophobia easing as more and more light filters through the forest canopy.

Later, we finally break through the edge of the forest and find

ourselves near a quiet little town. A little too quiet, I think, it seems almost like a ghost town. We make our way down the side of the hill towards the town below, and we almost make it to the bottom without mishap, but just as we near the bottom of the hill, the windows of a building on the left explode in a round of fresh gunfire. Another squad of soldiers rush in from the right, firing at the building and we hear cries of fear from its inhabitants as bullets tear gashes in the thin walls. The foremost soldier spots us and turns his fire on us instead. I freeze in panic, but my friend acts on instinct, rolling down the last of the hill before springing up on one knee, rifle raised to her eye and fired in less than a second. The soldier crumples. Another soldier falls as the house's inhabitants take the opportunity to strike back. Gunfire echoes all around me and I unfreeze as the closest soldier to me swings his gun at me, I duck and hit him in the face with my pistol. He barely seems to feel it, bringing the gun back round in a reverse swing that knocks me to the ground, hard. My breath is knocked violently from my lungs as I land, but the soldier gives me no time to catch my breath, loading a fresh clip of bullets into his gun. I hit him again, and he drops the clip, giving me a momentary reprieve to try to cock the pistol. He hits me again, grabbing the spilt magazine of ammunition back up to load into the gun. I pull the trigger, but all I get is a click. The gun jammed. The gas-masked killer pulls back the bolt on his gun, ready to fire, I smash the pistol's handle into the side of it, sending the bullets spiralling of course to tear up the earth by my side. He headbutts me, and I feel blood trickling from my nose. He brings the gun level with my head and I try one last desperate time to fire the pistol clutched in my grip. "ATATATATATA" it fires, loud and rapid, like an insane drum beat. I hold the trigger, eyes screwed tight in fear and desperation, holding it down as if my life depended on it. I only stop when my friend taps my shoulder and I notice that it's clicking, empty. I sit up and push the bullet-riddled corpse off myself, the true horror of what I just did finally sinking in. I killed a man. KILLED HIM. I just ended someone's life and it feels terrible. No matter how I try to justify it to myself, nothing changes how rotten I feel. I start to cry, barely aware of the hands helping me over to the house.

A few hours of consolation by my friend (Yes, I'm calling her that now, she has stuck by me all this time, after all) and I feel better, though still horrible. The people in the house explain to us that The Combine, those soldiers we foughtâ€| that I killed, are in control of the country, and as far as they know, the world. They had their base somewhere called City 17, but reports say that the Citadel, the Combine base, was destroyed by someone called Freeman. These people are part of a rebellion against the Combine rule, the Resistance, as they call themselves. They fight back where they can but mostly they spend their lives running from the Combine military. The Resistance members go on to describe how the Combine got here in the first place, how they won something called the Seven Hours War and took control of the planet, how their leaders on Earth are giant telekinetic flying maggots, called Advisors. They talk for a while, explaining everything from the Combine military to the intricacies of Resistance etiquette. They give us a pen and paper each and ask us what our names are. I answer with my own name, but my companion simply shrugs and writes that she can't remember anything from more than a week ago, let alone her name. Our new friends take turns deciding on names and she chooses Helen as her name. The room gets cold as the sun begins to set and I untie and zip up my Aperture Jumpsuit. "Wait, that's an Aperture Laboratories jumpsuit! And fairly

new at that, whenever you got out, it can't have been more than a week ago. Yesterday Dave found some Aperture cube thing in a field not far from here. It yours?" I nod, and smile when they bring in the charred and bullet-ridden Companion Cube, the one that GLaDOS gave me after my release, two days and what feels like years ago. I'd forgotten about it, having decided to leave it in the field. I couldn't carry it very far, yet here it was, miles from where I'd left it. I have to admire Dave's strength to be able to carry it all this way. I pick it up and absent mindedly fiddle with the 6 heart embellished discs on its sides while watching Helen try to beat them at a bizarre card game involving two packs of cards, chess pieces and several metal washers. I find that each disc can turn, and set about turning each one to try and alleviate the boredom. I turn the sixth and suddenly "Click" the cube's corners pop out and the top folds open. Inside, to my shock and joy, is one brand new Aperture Science Handheld Portal Device, a portal gun. The design is slightly different from memory, sleeker and longer, with a far more streamlined casing and some sort of scope on the top of it. I grab the portal gun, relishing in the familiar feel of the gun, the gentle humming, the twin triggers resting comfortably against my fingers. The colour is more metallic than before, a silver-white that complements the futuristic design of the new portal gun. An arm rest folds out of the back to rest snugly against my shoulder, a nice touch. I peer back into the cube and see another, clean Aperture jumpsuit. Again, it seems to have been redesigned, with elbow and knee pads, wrist braces and a more red-orange colour. Its accompanying jet black tank top has the same electric violet Aperture logo on the front as the jumpsuit and a pair of similarly coloured tight-fitting trousers. I take the clothing into the adjoining room and change, the new clothes fitting far better than the old. The chest of the jumpsuit is stiff, and when I check to see why, I see the label "Aperture Science Everything-proof Weave â€" 20% tougher than Kevlar or your money back" on the inside of it. I have to smile at that, typical Aperture. I straighten up and begin towards the door when a rapid knock comes from the other side. I open it, and Helen hands me the cube's final gift and a note, presumably from GLaDOS. I read the note first, able to tell it was from GLaDOS by the way it was written.

Chell

I can't believe I'm giving you these, but I hope your abnormal levels of tenacity will keep them out of the wrong hands. DO NOT LOSE THEM. And whatever you do, DO NOT LET THE COMBINE HAVE THEM. I have to admit, testing won't be nearly as thrilling without you trying to destroy everything. It's nice having peace and quiet, you know, without insane mutes trying to kill me or imbeciles taking over the facility. Keep them safe.

Good luck, you monster.

GLaDOS

With the note read, I turn to GLaDOS's final gift. It looks like a pair of long fall boots, only black and with a far more complex heel spring and half of it that should slot over the top of my thigh. I remove my Boots and switch over to the new ones. As I put them on, they compress to fit around my legs, and when I move my legs, a quiet robotic whir fills the air. Motorised Long Fall Boots, whatever will GLaDOS think of next? Then again, maybe it's better not to ask that

question.

I strut into the next room, jaws dropping at my high-tech attire. I toss my old pair of Boots into the corner and jog at a steady pace out of the house and down the street, testing out my new boots, Helen following with a grin on her face at my sudden change of mood. After a while, we turn back and head towards the house. Helen sprints ahead back inside the house, while I shoot one portal through the shattered window and another on the wall in front of me. I leap through into the living room of the house, skidding to a halt just short of the card game. Grinning happily, I click the switch on the side of the gun and the portals disappear. After some rather interesting conversations about tomorrow's plans, we head to bed. Tomorrow looks set to be a long day's travel and we'll need all the sleep we can get if the Combine are going to keep showing up as commonly as they have.

Grinning to myself, I slip, fully clothed, into bed and drift into a deep, dreamless sleep.

Author's Note

This is a bit of an experiment for me in terms of perspective. I've never written a first person story before and this is only my 2**nd**** fanfiction so far so please be constructive with your criticism. Harsh words won't help make my story better, but honest advice will. I'm trying to write this in a similar style to The Hunger Games (the book, not the film), don't know if the style is anything near but it's working so far. **

**This is taking far longer to write than my previous story, so updates will be few and far between but hopefully they'll have a lot of content in them. I'm trying to write long chapters with this one, about 2 in-story days per chapter. At some point in future I may fast forwards a week or two, but I'll give you fair warning if I do that, so you can expect the next 2 days in the story every update.
**

**Review please, even if all you have to say is your opinion on whether or not it's good, I'd love to hear from you. It helps a lot.
**

See you next chapter

Zombificus

2. Dead on Arrival

Exile's Aftermath-

Chapter Two-

I'm woken by the glare of sunlight, streaking through holes in the bullet riddled roof to shine annoyingly in my eyes. I blink, trying to clear my blurry vision as I rise groggily from bed and move over to the door, portal gun still attached to my arm where I'd neglected to remove it last night. I adjust the gun's position on my arm before heading out of the room, my half-asleep mind following the smell of cooking food. I make my way drowsily to the kitchen where Helen - our

resident cook, it would seem - was cooking a bizarre mix of herbs, vegetables and meat with some sort of home-cooked bread. Whatever it was, it smelled good and was bound to taste even better. As I sit patiently, the Resistance members emerge from their rooms and shamble groggily towards the smell of food the same way I did. As the group of sleep-deprived rebels make their way towards me, I can't help the thought of a pack of zombies; like in those old horror films I watched beforeâ€¦well, beforeâ€¦ you-know-what happened. The thought was so perfect that I burst out laughing, though no one could actually hear me. As they make their way over, one of them comments "I never thought of cooking headcrab meat that way, great idea" I raise my eyebrow at him and he explains "Headcrabs. You know, four legged little alien things that like to munch on people's heads? No? Don't look so worried, they're harmless when they're cooked and they make a great steak." After a minute, Helen serves breakfast and we all wolf down her fantastic cooking. Over the breakfast table, we discuss plans for the days ahead. The house we're hiding in isn't safe, so we're going to fetch some cars from a nearby Resistance outpost and make our way down the coast roads towards the ruins of City 17. Hopefully we won't run into many of the Combine's many 'Syths'; genetically engineered creatures augmented with technology like guns, jet engines and armour, but with this many of us, we're likely to attract attention, and not the good sort.

An hour later, we're a safe distance from the house we were in and the mood's far more relaxed. Idle chatter's filling the air and everyone is more themselves without any immediate threats to their lives, the stress melting away in the warm summer sun, the blue sky above us unbroken by any clouds. If we ignore the fact that just yesterday we were in a life-and-death situation, we can almost pretend this is a normal day in a normal world, where all you had to worry about was getting out of bed in time for what you were doing that day, where cold-blooded murderers weren't in control of the planet. We continue down a hill, following the road round a bend and carry on at a leisurely pace towards our destination, laughing and joking around, at ease.

Our carefree mood is shattered by what we find in the middle of the road. A dead Resistance soldier, face mutilated beyond recognition, a bullet hole through his bloody skull, lay next to a small barricade in the road, a Resistance checkpoint. Half the barricade has been knocked to the ground and the supplies he was guarding lie scattered all over the road, bullets rolling idly down the road. Gashes ripple along the man's body, which lies in a pool of congealed blood. We hastily move on from the grisly sight, several of the less experienced soldiers vomiting in the bushes, I turn away, feeling sick from the image engraved on the back of my mind. Further along, we come across a dead dog, its face smeared with blood, a single bullet through its skull. Whatever killed the man killed the dog that had mutilated the corpse. The pool of blood around the dog is still spreading, it died recently. Whoever did this is still around, and we keep our eyes open for any figures in the distance, tension rising as we find no sign, nothing. A noise comes from the trees to the left and the soldiers open fire, but nothing is there. Shaken, I continue by Helen's side, picking up the pace to a slow jog, wanting to get out of here, fast. We continue down the stretch of road until way after the sun has set, desperate for somewhere sheltered to sleep for the night, uneasy about sleeping in the open. After several hours trekking in the dark, we finally call it a day; no choice but to sleep in a clearing just off the road, still far too close to the

body of the soldier to feel in any way secure. As we settle down, noises come from the trees to our left, but a check of the surrounding area finds nothing. Despite settling into our sleeping bags, I doubt we'll get much sleep tonight.

Exhaustion finally takes me into sleep's embrace, but my dreams are anything but pleasant. I run, desperately, through the forest, but always end up in the same clearing, where the dead man sits, waiting for me, and a dark figure shifts through the treeline behind. I run, fleeing from the figure, but it always follows, always just a few steps behind, its shadowed face staring holes into the back of my head, sending shivers down my spine. I run and run, further and further, always back at that same clearing, always the same, every time, but still I run and run, faster and faster, more and more terrified, the shadow figure drawing closer, I can imagine its grin, enjoying the chase. I'm back at the same clearing, the same each time, only now, there's a difference. A ring of shadow-men stand around the edge of the clearing, blocking my escape, as I turn to look behind me, to check for a way out that isn't there, I trip and land on the corpse of the man, his bloodied skull inches from my face. The circle grows closer and closer and I try to get up, too weak to manage it, I slump back down. The circle draws closer and closer, nearer and nearer, until they stand around me. I raise my head to meet their cold gaze, and freeze as I sense my own doom. The figures raise their hands to point at me, and then, the last thing I hear is "BANG!", before the dream snaps black as night and I wake with a start.

"KRACKK!" Snapped from my daze; I turn my head to see Helen on one knee, firing shots at a retreating figure, one of our group lies dead in her sleeping bag, a bullet through her head, just like the dog, just like the man. The figure disappears back into the treeline, and we sit, shocked, in our sleeping bags, realising how close we'd all come to being killed. All hopes of sleep brutally shattered, we set about preparing for the next leg of the journey and bury the poor woman. We all keep looking at the mound of earth solemnly, long after she's been buried. Tears spring in the corners of my eyes, and I struggle not to break down like so many of us have done. Not tonight, not again. I'm not going to let my emotions rule my actions, if the leaders aren't keeping it together, then it's hardly fair to expect the rest of our party to. I look around, two of the Resistance soldiers sitting together, sobbing uncontrollably, some of the soldiers looking angry, murderous looks on their faces, and worst of all was the look on the Resistance commander's face, one of doubt, in himself, in us, in our plan, in the whole Resistance itself. I can tell what he's thinking; his face is screaming it to anyone who looks close enough. Beside me, Helen crouches, feverishly loading fresh bullets into her guns, sheathing and unsheathing her knife, turning the blade as if mesmerised, before stabbing it down into the soft earth as if it were our mystery attacker and not the ground.

Later on, we carry on shakily down the road. Twitchy and paranoid, stressed and sleepless, we continue onwards, the events of last night affecting everyone and leaving no one untouched.

A morbid feeling fills the air as we continue onwards, the threat of our stalker hanging over us like a black cloud. It's not far to where the cars are, but after last night we aren't holding out much hope of the Resistance outpost being intact.

As we clear the edge of the forest, our fears become reality. In the distance, smoke curls up from the black outline of the town, our destination. The town was hit hard, if the people here were lucky, they'll have got out in the cars, but I get the feeling it'll be us with the better luck this time. The isolated bits of chatter that had tried to lift the mood before withered and died at the sight, the darkening horizon lit with the flicker of fire that reflects in our eyes.

We move closer, creeping along the shattered asphalt towards the outpost at the far edge of town. Our fears for the inhabitants is confirmed by the sight of corpses littering the street ahead, the road more red than black around them. Snapped into action, the Resistance soldiers moved into formation, spreading out along the sides of the street, one man taking point while the others swept the burnt out skeletons of houses for any threat.

It's a ghost town, everything dead and burning and the weight of everything that's happened over the last few days presses in on us. It crushes our spirit more with every further step, every new corpse we find, every scorched building. We near the town's centre, where the worst sight so far waits for us. A pile of corpses burnt to a crisp atop the remains of a wooden pyre, soiling the air with the smell of burnt flesh and smoke, a monument to the Combine's sins. We take a moment to pay our respects to the poor people, men and women and children, who called this town their home. If the town was attacked this badly, the Resistance base must have been the target, which leaves our fate looking as gloomy as that of the people who died here.

I continue ahead, taking the lead of our little group in my haste to get away from the gory scene. Treading cautiously, we head along the road to the other side of town, where the outpost is, and even from here the damage is obvious. Metal plates that served as heavy barricades lie strewn across the street as though they'd been tossed there by a stroppy toddler. Blue smoke wisps out from every opening in the building and remnants of fire still flickers in the lower windows. Deep holes in the earth lead across the dual lanes of the road in front of us, on course to the outpost, the footprint of a "Strider", perhaps the most feared of the Combine's synths and by the looks of our outpost, clearly one of the most destructive.

The smoke-spewing husk of the outpost looms in front of us and we all stop and stare for what feels like forever at the battered remains of our last great hope, at the faces of dead men and women who couldn't get out in time, unseeing faces pressed against the glass in sick mimicry of children pulling faces against windows. We stare, eyes fixated in horrific fascination at the chaos in this place, unable to pull our view away. We stare, and we stare, and we stare, until finally the tears in our eyes and the pain in our hearts becomes too much and at last we turn away. Shakily, I lead the way towards the garage door, dented by the impact of a soldier's corpse, flung with such force into it that the shattered bones pierce out of his body at every angle, a gruesome image that I will never forget until I die, and even then the ghost of it would linger on my corpse. Retching, I heave the remains away from the garage door, turning to vomit my breakfast onto the crumbling ground before dragging it the last metre or so behind a bush. I turn away, but feel twin pricks of heat from his eyes on the back of my neck as I take my first step, shuddering, I turn back to him and close his eyes. It was probably a trick of the

light but his lips seem to curl up into a slight smile, grateful. And for the first time, I don't feel as horribly burdened by all I've seen, it's as if when I laid him to rest, I laid all the death I've seen to rest along with it. Looking around at the carnage all about me, I don't feel much at allâ€ just emptiness.

I nod to the soldiers and they raise the heavy steel door of the garage, a bizarre amalgamation of makeshift barricades and botch-job shields. The door groans and clatters as they lift it, a screechy mess of sounds expressing its stubborn unwillingness to open. As soon as it's high enough, we duck under it and hurry inside, guns drawn and ASHPD ready everything is cloaked by the stinging smoke, clouding our vision and making it hard to breathe, fire in our lungs. One of the soldiers hands out a selection of mismatched gas masks and we put them on hastily, desperate for clean air to breathe. As the smoke hisses out of the open garage door, the view becomes clear, and we wish that it hadn't. Skeletons, all flesh burnt off the bones by the acidic gas. God knows how much pain they went through before they closed their eyes for the last time; the thought of it makes me cringe, despite my newfound resistance against these events.

The cars are all still there but we can see immediately they'll take some work before they're roadworthy again. Wheels missing, engines wreathed in black smoke, axles wrenched loose from the chassis. This will take a lot to fix, and that leaves the problem of where we sleep tonight. Very few of the buildings are safe to even go near, but I doubt anyone would want to sleep in here with the skeletons. After a short while, we agree reluctantly to set up camp just outside, none of us likes the idea of being out in the open with our stalker still loose but nowhere is safe to sleep in any of the buildings, the garage is too badly damaged to risk sleeping in. If it collapsed we'd all be crushed to death and the smoke still lingers menacingly.

And so we set to work building a perimeter wall from bits of rubble and debris, others set up sleeping bags and a campfire within the walls of our makeshift camp. Our resident mechanic toils at fixing the least damaged vehicles; getting two back in working condition by the time the 3-and-a-half-metre high perimeter wall is complete and reinforced heavily. After that, we just sit around, the mood rising to a happy hubbub of camaraderie and much idle chatter on subjects ranging from whether Combine soldiers have genitalia to the best way to crochet a beanie hat. As the sun dips lazily over the horizon, morale is high and the smell of Helen's trademark cooking fills the hazy summer air, our ramshackle fort bathed in the soft bronze glow from the setting sun.

All is well.

This, however, could not last. Through the streets lit only by the flickering embers of the houses, a figure moves. Its slim form is dressed all in white, with a glowing eyepiece streaming light out to survey the area ahead. Our stalker has returned. Heel springs carry its form forwards faster, lighter, nothing to fear from gravity's embrace, it sprints along the charred remains of roofs, the tops of scorched walls, leaping and rolling like a ninja. It crouches like a cat on the rooftop opposite and readies a rifle to fire. Pulling back the bolt to load the shot, it raises the scope to its single eyepiece and fiddles with the view before moving it in tiny, precise movements to centre the crosshairs on its target. Underneath the helmet, the assassin smiles as it tightens its grip on the trigger, at one with

the gun, the bullet and the task at hand. As if sensing the cold hand of death on his shoulder, the Resistance Commander whirls his head round, eyes widening at the sight of a single red dot on a rooftop he opens his mouth to speak, the last thing he will ever do. Then cold lead meets warm flesh and he plummets backwards, the light in his eyes disappearing like candles being snuffed out. There's a thud and a split second later, the splatter of blood on the warm grass.

Everyone snaps awake and grabs their guns; meanwhile the red light from our stalker's eyepiece has disappeared, changing its position to get a better shot. We stand around, tense, some of our number crying over the death of the Commander, the rest of us scanning the surroundings for our assailant, but it seems like it disappeared into thin air, a ghost.

Then, a shout. We whirl round, to see another of us dead on the ground, a curved knife sticking out of her back. The walls we built to keep us safe act like a prison, keeping us trapped like fish in a barrel, funnelling us out the only exit. This was a big mistake. A body knocks into me and I feel hot liquid spatter down my back, on impulse I spin around and the still-warm corpse of another soldier falls to the ground, blood spurting from the hole in his throat. A flash of red from the left, we turn and open fire, a small spray of blood fills the air before our ever-agile attacker dives into cover, loosing off a shot as it does so, deadly accurate, another of our number drops, the grass is now more red than green. A hail of grenades soars over the wall and the sounds of panicked running carry to our ears, one step, two steps, three steps, BOOM. Thrown to its feet by the blast, it scrambles to its feet, discarding the twisted wreck of its rifle to dive into cover once more. The sound of a pistol being cocked rings out, and I smile. Now we have the advantage. In the temporary lull as our enemy recovers, I take a look around at who we have left. Five resistance members and Helen stand with me in the camp, the ground littered with the bodies of the fallen and the moaning injured, hit with shrapnel from the explosion. Looking at the people we've lost already, I grimace and tuck the ASHPD tighter against my shoulder and brace myself for the coming battle. Time to make them pay.

Suddenly, too quick for us to react, the assassin sprints forwards, it fires, once, twice, three times and the soldiers fall like ragdolls, I take a hit, the force of it sending me spinning round, round, down into the bloodsoaked grass, blood spurting from my shoulder. I look up to see Helen loose a burst of machinegun fire before the white figure collided with her, grappling onto her and knocking her to the ground. Helen swings a punch, gun trapped, useless, underneath her but the assassin doesn't even react, ripping the knife from Helen's belt and raising it to strike. Somehow, I get up and sprint inhumanly fast towards it, hooking its head with my elbow and pulling it backwards away from Helen. I barely get two steps before it whisks around violently to smash me off my feet, the helmet flying off its head as I tumble back onto the ground for the second time in as many minutes.

It turns its back on me as I lie out of breath on the floor and retrieves the knife from the grass, kicking the gun from Helen's grasp and stamping on her stomach. Long black hair, like Helen's, spills down the back of its jumpsuit, swinging down in front of its face as it leans over Helen's body, knife in hand. As it raises the knife above its head in preparation for the kill, I heave myself up, every movement a marathon challenge. As its arm begins the downward

arc, I snatch up a gun from the floor and fire a shot clean through the back of its head. It stays knelt for a moment before toppling backwards onto the grass, Helen lying in shock, face covered in blood, hopefully not her own. I move to help her up but she bats my hand away with a ferocity I wasn't expecting from her, tears pouring from her rage-filled eyes. I sign "What's wrong?" and she simply points at the corpse of our assailant. Looking at it now, I can see it wears the same uniform as Helen, but worse than that is the face. A wave of sheer guilt hits me like a steamroller and I feel the prickling of tears in my eyes.

Older, yes, and with a few more freckles, but the face of our attacker was almost identical to Helen's, they could be sisters, twins even. And I just killed her.

I look back at Helen, my face slack with horror. I sign "sorry" but she snarls at me and spits a goblet of blood and saliva into my face, shaking her head furiously. I collapse to my knees, defeated as she runs off, vaulting the rubble of the wall, the sound of her sobs ringing out through the deathly silence of the night, growing steadily quieter the further she goes.

I curl up in a ball, unconcerned by the blood that soaks my clothes and cry, repeating the same thing over and over in my head; '_What have I done?_'

'_What have I done?_"

Author's Note â€“ Sorry this is so late, my mind sort of clogged up when I was writing the 2nd half of this chapter, and this meant I didn't finish it before I went on holiday last week. I came home to find the chapter, along with my original copy of chapter one and a whole bunch of other files on my computer had corrupted and were unusable. I've been rewriting this from scratch since Saturday evening when I got back and I was still stuck on the 2nd half until today, when I broke through the creative block and wrote the rest of it.

End
file.